

## Understanding UNRWA: what the Trump cuts tell us

Article (Accepted Version)

Irfan, Anne (2019) Understanding UNRWA: what the Trump cuts tell us. The Middle East in London, 15 (3). pp. 7-8. ISSN 1743-7598

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/83094/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

## Understanding UNRWA: What the Trump cuts tell us

*Anne Irfan* unpacks Trump's decision to quit funding UNRWA and examines the humanitarian, economic and political consequences of such a move

In 2018, the Trump administration announced the withdrawal of US funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). The move marked a dramatic rupture in US Middle Eastern policy, after decades in which it had acted as the Agency's largest single donor. It also triggered a flurry of media interest in UNRWA, which until now had a relatively low profile despite being the oldest UN refugee agency in the world.

Much of the reaction to the US cuts has focussed on their damaging socio-economic impact, with good reason. UNRWA is the primary welfare provider to more than five million registered Palestinian refugees in its five areas of operation: Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza. As the majority of these refugees are stateless, UNRWA is the closest thing they have to a government – a role reflected in its services. In addition to emergency relief, UNRWA runs large-scale health and education programmes and administers infrastructure in the refugee camps.

The Agency's services have become especially critical in recent years, as Palestinian refugees suffer the impact of the ongoing crises in Gaza and Syria. The Gaza blockade, now in its 12<sup>th</sup> year, has left more than 700,000 Palestinians in need of emergency food aid from UNRWA. Meanwhile, 418,000 Palestinians in Syria are in critical need of its relief services; a further 120,000 have fled the country, with many now heavily reliant on UNRWA to meet their basic needs.

The Trump cuts have gravely endangered these essential services. Prior to 2018, UNRWA was already suffering from a prolonged budget deficit with its services seriously overstretched. Despite being a UN body, UNRWA is almost entirely dependent on voluntary donations, making the impact of this kind of defunding especially devastating. The Trump move sent the Agency's management on an intensive fundraising drive, seeking alternative donations to plug the gap from governments around the world.

To make matters worse, the political significance of these cuts is no less important than their devastating humanitarian impact. Since UNRWA's creation at the end of 1949, it has served as an international acknowledgement of the Palestinian refugees' unresolved plight. Its continuing existence signifies that their dispossession has not been forgotten on the world stage; some see it as official international recognition of their refugee status and attached political rights. While UNRWA itself denies that any recognition it provides is politically binding, its registration cards are often the only official identity documents that stateless Palestinian refugees hold. In Lebanon and Syria, Palestinian refugees have been compelled to produce their UNRWA registration cards in order to verify their identity when seeking the right to work or travel.

What's more, in the eyes of many Palestinians, UNRWA is tied to the UN's particular responsibility for their statelessness. Having issued the 1947 Partition Plan, the UN was directly involved in the events leading up to the Palestinians' national dispossession in 1948 (known in Arabic as the Nakba or 'catastrophe'). As a UN body, UNRWA's services were therefore not charity but rather an entitlement stemming from injustice – one that should be issued until the Palestinian refugees can realise their right of return, also recognised by the UN in Resolution 194. This understanding of UNRWA's work, expressed in refugees' correspondence with the UN as early as 1951, has remained predominant among many refugee communities – the Bethlehem-based BADIL Center for Palestinian Refugee Rights recently launched a campaign entitled *UNRWA Is Our Right Until We Return*.

In such a setting, the Trump administration's decision to defund UNRWA has an added curiosity. It arguably provides a clue as to the possible orientation of the much-vaunted 'deal of the century' for Middle East peace, officially still under wraps. Indeed, the Trump administration's detachment from the Agency has not been limited to ending financial support; it has also declared itself at odds with the very premise of UNRWA's work. In August 2018, leaked emails from Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and senior advisor on the Middle East, revealed plans to 'disrupt' UNRWA's work. He wrote that the Agency 'perpetuates a status quo, is corrupt, inefficient and doesn't help peace'.

The emails went on to suggest that Kushner's 'deal of the century' will involve stripping the refugee status of the five million Palestinians currently registered with the Agency. As UNRWA is premised on the Palestinians' refugee status, dismantling it would be crucial to achieving this goal. The US and Israeli media have reported similarly that Kushner is pressuring the government of Jordan to strip the country's Palestinian population of their refugee status. Such moves are designed to undermine any prospects that the Palestinian refugees' right of return could be realised. If successful, they would therefore solidify the status quo of the Palestinians' dispossession – somewhat ironically, given that this is precisely what Kushner has accused UNRWA of doing.

Kushner's approach is in keeping with the stance of other senior figures in the Trump administration. Nikki Haley, former US ambassador to the UN, has similarly criticised UNRWA for supposedly perpetuating the refugees' belief in their right of return; she has also claimed, erroneously, that UNRWA overstates the number of Palestinian refugees today. There are further consistencies with Benjamin Netanyahu's earlier calls to abolish UNRWA completely. The leaked emails thus provide further evidence of the US administration's tight alignment not only with the Israeli state, but in particular with the leadership of its current government under Netanyahu.

The Trump administration's defunding of UNRWA is not only about money, but is part of a much wider strategy to discredit and ultimately dismantle the Agency. Whether or not it will succeed is another question. So far, UNRWA's fundraising efforts have had considerable success in garnering special contributions from Europe, the Gulf and East Asia, to plug the budgetary gap created by the withdrawal of US donations. Until now the Agency has been able to continue providing services across its five fields of operation, albeit while retaining a deficit.

The removal of US support for UNRWA has therefore arguably demonstrated the limitations of US power; the Agency has prevailed even without its erstwhile major donor. At the same time, the funding crisis triggered by the Trump cuts has returned the Palestinian refugees to the centre of the 'Palestine question'. Yet critical questions remain over UNRWA's future. As the Palestinian refugees remain extremely vulnerable, any threats of dismantling UNRWA risk major political and humanitarian consequences, with an impact that may engender the start of another crisis in the region.

*Anne Irfan lectures in Middle Eastern history at the University of Sussex. Her PhD, completed at the London School of Economics, examined the historical development of UNRWA's role in the Palestinian refugee camps*

*Pull out quotes:*

*PQ1: Since UNRWA's creation at the end of 1949, it has served as an international acknowledgement of the Palestinian refugees' unresolved plight*

*PQ2: The Trump administration's defunding of UNRWA is not only about money, but is part of a much wider strategy to discredit and ultimately dismantle the Agency. Whether or not it will succeed is another question*